



# Army Transforming America

## *Better Living Through Chemicals*

**C**OTTON had powered the economy of the American South since before the founding of the republic. Cotton fiber was important to America's fabric industry and, with tobacco, was the South's largest export to foreign markets. But in the 1920s cotton-destroying insects that had invaded from Mexico seriously threatened this vital cash crop. Each year from the time of their unwelcome arrival, the insects spoiled millions of dollars worth of cotton. In desperation, the U.S. government called upon the Army's Chemical Warfare Service to devise methods for exterminating the boll weevil.

The CWS tested many of their known chemical warfare agents on the boll weevil and the cotton plant. The experiments found that some of the agents killed the weevils but also injured the plants. Other agents were found to have no effect. Despite its efforts, the CWS did not end boll weevil infestation. But in the years that followed, the CWS experiments led agriculture officials and public health authorities to other approaches for attacking boll weevils and other insects.

Another invader came by sea — aboard the large number of ships docking in U.S. ports. Many carried insects and other agents of disease, and the CWS helped to develop ways to fumigate these ships so that they could not spread disease to the United States. Even today, the importance of the CWS's labors is evident by the continuing danger to public health and American agriculture posed by insects that may migrate in shipments of foreign produce.

In pre-World War II America, taking on these difficult but necessary civilian projects demonstrated the value of the CWS to society and clearly showed that the CWS did far more than prepare the Army for the horrors of war. In an era when there was a strong push to cut military spending and isolate the nation from foreign affairs, the Army's peacetime efforts through the CWS helped justify its existence in the eyes of America's taxpayers. And it allowed the CWS to help protect agricultural exports while assuring American consumers that the foods arriving from overseas were safe to eat.

— CPT Patrick Swan